

Relearning History

A Question-Driven Approach to the Study of the Past

Joe Regenbogen

Vernon Series in Education



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*To Jack and Julie,
a father has never been so proud...*

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“The most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history.”

George Orwell

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Preface



**The author and his little sister Debby play in a sandbox, 1959.
Courtesy of Al Regenbogen (PD-self)**

My sister, Debby, was born on New Year's Eve. I was born ten months earlier on March 3 of the same year. It might have been easier on my mom if she had just carried twins since the entire experience could have concluded in nine months. Be that as it may, Debby is my only sibling and except for the typical high school rivalry years, we have always been close.

There was a period during my sister's adolescence when she talked about finishing high school and then attending a junior college to develop some sort of trade. Her aspirations changed, however, after she moved to a new city during her senior year. A biology teacher saw Debby's intellectual potential and provided the encouragement that only great teachers can bestow. Debby enrolled in Illinois State University the following year, and nine years later, she was walking across the stage to accept her diploma for a doctoral degree in social work. Presently, my sister is a valued faculty member in the school of social work at Case Western Reserve University. She has taught research courses, organized annual trips to other countries as the director of international education and served on academic committees. In addition, she has raised three bright children who have pursued impressive academic careers of their own. As her big brother, I could not be more proud.

However, Debby would be the first to admit that there is something missing in her remarkable academic record. Like so many other adults I have met, she learned very little history in school. Part of the problem emanates from lackluster

history classes built around boring textbooks. Of course, if her high school teachers could be consulted on the matter, they might say that much of the problem resided in Debby's lack of interest or motivation.

My sister's story reminds me of the many students who have walked through the doors of my own classroom on the first day of school asking why they needed to study history. "*I plan to be an accountant, why do I need to know about the past?*" "*After college, I plan to work for my dad, and one day, I will take over his business. Why do I need to learn American history?*" I usually responded that school was intended to prepare them for life, not just a career. Part of that preparation involved molding them to be effective citizens in a democratic society. Often this rationale fell on deaf teenage ears, and only after teaching an engaging class that defied most of their expectations did many come around to appreciate the value of learning history.

In Debby's case, she managed to succeed in life despite her mediocre social studies education. Yet she would openly admit that she has not always been a model citizen when it comes to her participation in our democratic processes. Even now, if a political issue comes up in conversation, she often prefers to change the subject or leave the room.

Therefore, it should probably not come as a surprise that my sister was the individual who suggested the focus of this book. In one of our Sunday afternoon telephone conversations (Debby lives in Cleveland while I make my home in St. Louis), she asked an intriguing question: how many adults are like herself? People who may be well educated, at least in a particular career field, but who are largely ignorant of the past when it comes to understanding the world today. When she raised the question, I immediately thought of other family members, friends or even the person who cuts my hair. Time after time, when I have told people that I teach history for a living, I hear the same sentiment. "*Oh, I hated history in school, it was so boring. Though I wish I could have a better understanding of it now.*"

As I reflected on Debby's question, I realized she was right. There are probably millions of educated adults who struggle to make sense of the current headlines. The planet we live on has become an enormously complicated place, and without a solid understanding of the past, making sense of the present or future is an insurmountable undertaking. I have always loved teaching history, and now my sister was presenting me with a new challenge.

When I was a child, my parents gave Debby and myself an astonishing amount of freedom every summer. We could play with our friends, ride our bikes all over the city or relax in a backyard swimming pool. The only requirement was that we had to read for an hour every day. Within reasonable limits, we could choose whatever we wanted to read, and I always chose history books. Ever since, I have had a burning desire to learn about the past, and for the last 37 years, this has

manifested itself in a career where I could pursue my passion for teaching history to others.

Properly taught, history is a collection of amazing stories that could rival the richest literature or fiction. It is also a necessary component for building effective citizenship skills that will enable our democracy to flourish and endure. Students should ideally study their history while in school. For those people like Debby, however, who did not, it is never too late to relearn history. Thank you, little sister, for suggesting and inspiring the writing of this book.

Chapter 1

Introduction:

Why do many people need to relearn history?



David Cameron
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“I think it's important in life to speak as it is, and the fact is that we are a very effective partner of the U.S., but we are the junior partner. We were the junior partner in 1940 when we were fighting the Nazis.”

Prime Minister David Cameron, July 21, 2010

When Mr. Cameron spoke these words during an interview with Sky News on his first visit to the United States as Prime Minister, he incited a furious backlash. Most Americans did not pay much attention, but in the United Kingdom, he was widely accused of forgetting the sacrifices made in 1940 by those who fought in the Battle of Britain, the heroes of Dunkirk and the Londoners bombed in the Blitz. In fact, Britain stood alone in 1940 against the behemoth of Nazi Germany. America did not actually enter the war until December of 1941 and only after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. In the early years of the war, Britain had an

army of 2.4 million men in the field when the Americans had just 240,000, one tenth of the fighting force. It was not until 1944, one year before the war's conclusion, that the Americans had more men on the ground than the UK. By the end of the war, Britain had lost a total of 449,800 men compared with 418,500 Americans. One former veteran, Special Air Service hero Andy McNab said, *"It's very important to get this history right because people are still living who fought in 1940. There are still survivors of Dunkirk and fighter pilots from the Battle of Britain. For them, it is very, very important to recognize the role they played. This is living history."*

Cameron's blunder is just one of many examples when an elected politician has allowed ignorance of the past to hurt feelings and generate controversy. Prime Minister David Cameron arguably made a simple gaffe of historical details and did not intend to insult British veterans. After stating the insulting remark, Downing Street immediately claimed that Cameron had meant to refer to the 1940s in general. In addition, he issued an ambiguous apology upon his return to Great Britain. In contrast, the situation was far more serious in the case of former U.S. President George W. Bush.

On May 1, 2003, President Bush stood on the deck of the aircraft carrier, the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, and proclaimed that America's military mission in Iraq had been accomplished. He stated that because of the U.S. military, *"the tyrant has fallen and Iraq is free."* He went on to say, *"in the images of fallen statues we have witnessed the arrival of a new era,"* and that *"our coalition will stay until our work is done and then we will leave and we will leave behind a free Iraq."* The reality is that 13 years after President Bush made this speech, the United States still had 5,000 troops stationed in Iraq. They are there because much of the country is still plagued by violence, instability and chaos. By 2016, Iraq was effectively divided. The government in Baghdad controlled the central and southern parts, the Kurdistan Regional Government governed the northwest and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) occupied the western part. This hardly constitutes the *"new era"* promised by President Bush.

American involvement in Iraq was originally justified out of concerns that Saddam Hussein, Iraq's dictator, had supported terrorism and was building weapons of mass destruction. The available evidence has never proved these assertions. More important, the removal of Saddam Hussein as Iraq's leader unleashed a bloody civil war involving Shiites, Sunnis and ethnic Kurds. Close to 5000 American military personnel have given their lives in the cause of ushering in this *"new era,"* and nearly half a million people have died from war-related causes in Iraq since the US-led invasion in 2003.

When President Bush and his advisors made the decision to invade Iraq and overthrow Saddam Hussein, did they take into account the following historical facts?

1. Since the 16th Century, the land of Iraq, which included the famous “Fertile Crescent” considered to be the birthplace of modern civilization, was under the control of the Ottoman Empire. This remained the case until the Ottoman Turks joined the losing side of World War One.
2. After the First World War, Iraq was handed over as a “mandate” to be controlled by the British. When drawing its boundaries, the Europeans did not take into account that rival religious and ethnic groups would populate the area.
3. Saddam Hussein came to power in July of 1979 and set up a brutal but stable government. Until 2003, he proved to be the “glue” that generally held the country together.
4. Throughout history, whenever a strong ruler is removed, it has often created a vacuum of power that has resulted in civil war. Thousands of years ago, the Greek empire under Alexander the Great quickly fell apart upon his untimely death. The overthrow of Norodom Sihanouk in Cambodia in 1970 paved the way for civil war and the repressive rule of the Khmer Rouge that cost the lives of up to two million people. When Marshall Tito, the ruler of Yugoslavia, died in 1980, the stability that held that nation together dissolved, unleashing the disintegration of the country into several new republics, including Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia. The ensuing civil war and “ethnic cleansing” that accompanied the breakup took the lives of up to 140,000 people.

If President Bush had given stronger consideration to these historical trends, he might have made a much different decision. Even the former president has stated that he regrets using the phrase “*mission accomplished*” in his speech because it conveyed the erroneous message that America’s involvement in Iraq would soon wind to an end. Considering the long-term consequences of his actions, President Bush made a choice that cost the lives of thousands and created a volatile disaster in much of the Middle East. All of this might have been prevented if he had possessed a deeper understanding of the region’s history.

David Cameron and George W. Bush are not the only leaders to speak or act out of historical ignorance. Furthermore, there are also millions of voters who lack the same knowledge and understanding. Clearly, the world would be a better place if historical ignorance could be replaced by historical enlightenment. Why does ignorance seem to prevail? The fact that so many people do not possess this understanding reflects largely on the failures of our social studies educational system.

The purpose of social studies education

Despite some of the more popular misconceptions, the purpose of history classes is not to provide a nap period during the school day, nor is it to afford high school football coaches a place to hang out while they are not on the gridiron. Unlike academic areas such as math or science, social studies is not as concerned with the preparation of students for future careers, since only a tiny fraction will ever grow up to become historians or history teachers. The primary purpose of history classes is to produce effective citizens who will participate in a vibrant democracy.

Americans take great pride in the belief that the ultimate political power in our nation rests with the people. Counting every level of government from Congress down to the most localized boards and commissions, there are just over 500,000 elected representatives in a nation of almost 324 million people. Almost every citizen of the United States is eligible to run for one of those elected positions, and all adult Americans should participate in the electoral process whenever possible. While casting a ballot usually takes little effort and just a few minutes, voting intelligently requires a comprehensive understanding of the candidates, the issues and the overall state of affairs. This is virtually impossible to achieve without at least some historical knowledge.

In addition, an effective democracy requires active participation from the citizenry in the form of taking part in political campaigns, regularly communicating with elected representatives and joining movements when warranted by the circumstances. During the 1930s, when the nation was suffering through the longest and most severe economic trial in its history, more than two-dozen pieces of New Deal legislation were enacted to help Americans survive the Great Depression. Our democracy thrived even as other nations turned to communism or fascism. Twenty years later, when Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus because of the color of her skin, tens of thousands joined a boycott of the busses in Montgomery, Alabama, and this soon turned into a movement that involved millions. The result was civil rights legislation that abolished barriers to voting, jobs and public accommodations. In the 1980s, millions of Americans voted to support the "*Reagan Revolution*" that limited the role of the federal government in our nation's economy and helped to bring an end to the terrifying Cold War.

There have obviously been failures as well as successes. Over 600,000 Americans lost their lives in the Civil War, and even though it brought an end to slavery, bigotry and segregation continued to thrive for over another century. Women did not gain the right to vote until 1920. Indigenous tribes have endured massacres, broken treaties and debilitating heartbreak. Even today, more than 45 million Americans live below the poverty line. However, for 240 years, democracy has continued to flourish within the United States, and the only hope for its future lies in the education of its citizens. This is why social studies education deserves its status

along with English, mathematics and science in the “big four” of the secondary curriculum.

The problem

Unfortunately, too many history classes have been fraught with teacher-centered instruction built around mind-numbing textbooks. The curriculum has often focused on the requirement that students memorize lists of chronological facts and details. Rather than engage students in the compelling stories that can potentially make history the most interesting subject, the past is presented as lacking any connection or relevance to the present. Consequently, a majority of students find history to be boring. They avoid taking any history classes beyond the required high school subjects and remember very little of what is taught in those courses. The end result is that we have largely become a democratically illiterate society. A study by the McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum found that while 22 per cent of Americans could name all five *Simpson* family members, just one in 1000 could name all of the five freedoms in the First Amendment.

For years, political pundits and late-night talk show hosts have derived considerable pleasure from citing the results of the latest polls that show the extent of American ignorance in the field of history. What happened in 1066? Just ten per cent know it is the date of the Norman Conquest of England. Who said the “*world must be made safe for democracy?*” Just 14 per cent knew it was Woodrow Wilson. Which nation dropped the atomic bomb? Only 49 per cent of Americans knew it was their own country.

The solution

If this is the current state of our democracy, what is the solution? First, there remains a dire need to continue improving the delivery of social studies curriculum in our schools. There are still too many students who endure the same mind-numbing experience of text readings, lectures and fill-in-the-blank assessments that confronted their parents and grandparents. An entire new generation of historically inept citizens is being churned out by our educational assembly lines, and in many school districts, the situation is going from bad to worse. Many history teachers are currently complaining that they are disfavored compared to their peers in the English, Math and Science departments, particularly when it comes to budgets, supplies, room assignments and staffing.

Some have admirably sought to improve the discipline of social studies, and efforts to reform the social studies curriculum date back over one hundred years. In 1916, John Dewey published his seminal book, *Democracy and Education*, where he wrote, “*Were all instructors to realize that the quality of mental process, not the production of correct answers, is the measure of educative growth,*

something hardly less than a revolution in teaching would be worked." Dewey's emphasis on student-centered learning and active engagement echoed other great thinkers from the more distant past. More than 2300 years ago, Plato wrote, "Do not train a child to learn by force or harshness; direct them to it by what amuses their minds, so that you may be better able to discover with accuracy the peculiar bent of the genius of each." In the 18th century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau admonished the educator to, "Teach your scholar to observe the phenomena of nature; you will soon rouse his curiosity, but if you would have it grow, do not be in too great a hurry to satisfy this curiosity. Put the problems before him and let him solve them himself."

This historical background laid the foundation for the New Social Studies Movement in the 1960s. Many school reformers in this decade took a different approach to teaching and learning, emphasizing inquiry, discovery and depth in pursuit of meaningful learning. A wide assortment of new projects emerged that attempted to reorganize curriculum according to higher-level skills and concepts, require students to engage in problem-solving activities and make connections within and across the curriculum. The emphasis was placed on issues, themes and ideas.

In 1977, a book was published that had a profound impact on my own teaching. *Defining the Social Studies* by Robert D. Barr, James L. Barth and S. Samuel Shermis divided social studies education into three traditions: "citizen transmission," "social science" and "reflective inquiry." All three traditions attempted to produce good citizenship skills, but they were distinguished by how they defined a good citizen. The first tradition assumed that a good citizen must possess a prescribed body of knowledge and a disposition that lent itself towards the value of patriotism. The second was based on the thinking that good citizenship required skills similar to those used by historians, economists, sociologists and other social scientists. The third, reflective inquiry was built around the idea that the heart of the social studies, and therefore good citizenship was effective decision-making. This tradition, the one clearly advocated by the three authors, emphasized the need to teach students how to research and investigate answers to questions that stemmed from their own curiosity. Then, through the critical examination and analysis of different answers to these questions, students can be taught to develop the decision-making skills necessary to be good citizens in a democracy.

Seven years later, TheodoreSizer, a leader of educational reform at Brown University, came out with *Horace's Compromise*. In this highly influential book, Sizer described the frustrations of a fictional English teacher attempting to survive in the traditional high school that operated more like a bureaucratic factory than an effective place of learning. By the book's end, Sizer prescribed ten common principles by which schools should operate. Among these were "learning to use one's mind well," emphasizing "depth over coverage," increased "personalization," "student as worker," "teacher as coach" and "demonstration of mastery." Sizer's

principles swept the nation as secondary schools from coast to coast joined his Coalition of Essential Schools.

Despite this long record of reform, there is still much to be done. A greater stress needs to be placed on social studies instruction in our schools, and more importantly, teachers of history and the other social studies need to come to a consensus that student-centered engagement must take priority over the tradition of textbooks, lectures and passive learning. But even if this change came to fruition in the near future, there would still be millions of adults for whom it would appear to be too late. The rebuttal to this assertion is that it is **never too late**.

The solution for the non-student

The prescription for grown adults must not involve textbooks. Since the traditional rendering of the past in the form of irrelevant details presented in a chronological sequence did not work well when used in school, it is doubtful that these types of textbooks would be any more effective today. Even if presented as compelling story telling, much of the information would bear little relevance to the lives of these people. They might enjoy reading the stories as they would good fiction, but it still would not necessarily transfer into better decisions being made on Election Day.

Therefore, a new paradigm is necessary. Borrowing from the intellectual foundation established by Plato, Rousseau, Dewey, Barr, Barth, Shermis and Sizer, this new approach to learning history must be based on inquiry. The first step calls for generating questions that originate from a person's curiosity of the current state of the world. The second step involves delving into the past to find answers to these questions. This should enable people to satisfy their curiosity, gain valuable background information and expand their field of understanding. Third, and most critically, the adult should practice a routine where this knowledge and understanding is applied to current events and issues. Rational thought processes should be developed and exercised the same way an athlete learns to hone the muscle memory needed to effectively swing a baseball bat or consistently sink a basketball foul shot. This combination of knowledge, understanding, public concern and decision-making process is the recipe for a more-informed citizenry.

A relevant example

At this point, an example of this approach might prove useful. In preliminary discussions with my daughter about the purpose of writing this book, the question was raised as to why the gender pay gap still exists. The presidential election campaign in 2016 brought this issue back into the regular news, and as a young woman with a law degree, my daughter saw the relevancy of this question with respect to her budding career. Women earn only 79 per cent of men's average

hourly wages, as the media has repeatedly informed us. Why does this inequity from the past continue to plague American society today?

Like all of the questions in this book, my daughter's query does not have a simple answer. History is the study of the past, but unlike the hard sciences, experiments cannot be performed to prove or disprove a hypothesis. Instead, the study of the past is messy. The evidentiary record is often incomplete and frequently generates more debate than consensus. Liberal historians often interpret the past differently from their more conservative counterparts. Each new generation of historians regularly uncover new "*truths*" about the past that their parents and grandparents failed to understand. Therefore, how should this question be answered so that my daughter might be able to gain credible information she can apply to the current political setting?

There is no perfect solution, but the approach that will be employed in this book is to break the past down into manageable blocks. Smaller, more specific chunks of knowledge are less subject to conflicting interpretations than larger conclusions. Once these blocks are combined, readers can then apply reason to draw their own conclusions. What should be the building blocks to answer the question about gender equality? Different history educators might possibly arrange different blocks, but in the end, they all should help my daughter make sense of this phenomenon. Here is what I assembled:

Building block #1 – The United States is still reeling from a long history of sexism. Most American women did not gain the right to own property until the middle of the 19th century, and it was not until 1920, less than 100 years ago, that women finally acquired the right to vote. The Equal Rights Amendment, which simply stated "*Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex,*" was first introduced into Congress in 1923, where it did not get passed for almost 50 years. Then, when it was sent to the states for ratification, it failed to gain the final three states that would have inserted this amendment into the Constitution. As for jobs, despite the enormous gains made by the "*Rosie the Riveters*" during the war years between 1941 and 1945, by 1947, women's labor-force participation was only 32 per cent.

As of 2013, there had been stark improvement. The women's labor-force participation rate had nearly doubled to 57 per cent. In 2011, women had earned 57 per cent of the bachelor's degrees and half of the PhDs and professional degrees. By 2014, women made up 34 per cent of the lawyers in this country, 37 per cent of the doctors and 61 per cent of the market analysts. Why the transformation? There are several reasons: the spread of household appliances, which saved time; the advent of the birth control pill, which made it easier to plan pregnancies; the availability of college to more women, which expanded job opportunities; and the rise of feminism, which challenged dominant stereotypes. Nevertheless, the wage gap is

still a reality, and many of the prevailing sexist attitudes that dominated the 1950s have not entirely disappeared. This leads to the next building block.

Building block #2 – There has been continuing resistance from several male-dominated job bastions. According to a study by Francine D. Blau and Lawrence M. Kahn, two Cornell University economists, the wage gap is at least partially explained by ongoing discrimination. They cited one study showing that when five symphony orchestras shifted to blind auditions with the candidate's identities unknown, women's success rates climbed dramatically. In another study, men and women with similar resumes applied for restaurant positions with high-priced eating establishments; the women's job offers were 50 per cent lower than the men's. The degree of the role played by discrimination is open to discussion, but there is no question that at least some of the employment barriers facing women in the past still exist in the present.

Building block #3 – The pay gap is simply the ratio of women's average hourly pay to men's hourly pay. Many people cite the 79 per cent figure to demand, "*equal pay for equal work*," but the jobs in comparison are not necessarily the same. According to Blau and Kahn, when these differences are taken into account, the ratio of women's pay to that of men rises to almost 92 per cent. Despite the advances, women remain more likely to work in lower-paying jobs, such as health-care aides, receptionists, cashiers and food servers. In addition, women on the whole still have slightly less on-the-job experience than men. All of this helps to explain their lower wages.

Building block #4 – Finally, there is "*the motherhood wage penalty*." Throughout history, a common assumption was that the woman was the more important parent, particularly in the early formative years of the child. Even the most modern woman still has biological reasons for taking some time off after giving birth. As a result, many careers are interrupted. Even when employers allow greater job flexibility, promotions and incomes often suffer, and many end up slamming into the "*glass ceiling*." According to Blau and Kahn, this is the reason why wage gaps between men and women are the greatest among the best-paid workers. Of the chief executive officers of Fortune 500 companies, only 4 per cent are women.

In the late 19th century, many Americans accepted the premise that there were separate "*spheres of influence*." Men were expected to work, support their families and play the political role in the larger world. Women were the masters of the household, with the primary task of tending to their children and maintaining the home. In fact, one sign that a family had successfully climbed into the ranks of the middle class was when a married woman could confine her work to within the home. This viewpoint dates back to prehistoric times when men tended to be the hunters while women were the gatherers. Both men and women inhabited separate worlds, but while different, most at the time considered them to be equal.

The Woman's Suffrage Movement at the turn of the century and the modern feminist movement in the 1960s shattered these roles and expectations, and the wage gap is at least partially explained by the fact that the dust has yet to settle from these relatively recent social advances.

When the information contained in these building blocks is presented to my daughter, she must then assemble them into a meaningful answer to her question. In addition, she should not rely only on her dad as a source for this information, because despite my best intentions, there is bound to be a degree of inaccuracy, incompleteness and bias contained within the blocks I have assembled for her. As stated before, history does not hold the precision of math or science. All historical sources, primary or secondary, come from the perception of a human being. Since no one is perfect, there is bound to be imperfections contained within every historical artifact and treatise.

Following her curiosity and employing her intellect, my daughter, like any other citizen in a democratic society, bears the ultimate responsibility for relearning the history not mastered during her years of secondary education. It is best to begin the process with a question focused on the contemporary world. Blocks of information can then be gathered from a wide array of sources and considered collectively in order to gain a better understanding of the present.

Relearning history

The traditional pattern has been to learn history from a book written by a historian who chooses what to include, the order it is presented and the language that shapes its meaning. In classrooms across the nation, social studies educators strive to reinforce this knowledge through lectures, teacher-centered activities, worksheets and quizzes. Students study primarily through memorization and attempt to provide evidence of what they have learned on pencil-and-paper assessments. This pattern may have worked for some, but many others have been left dumbfounded and overwhelmed when attempting to make sense of the complicated planet we inhabit.

Another option for these adults might involve beginning with questions like those explored in the remainder of this book. After reviewing the building blocks suggested within each chapter, the reader is encouraged to seek other sources that address the question from other angles, and then synthesize these perspectives into a meaningful answer. If this is done habitually with a wide spectrum of questions, the end result will be the civic education that may have evaded the reader back in school.

The questions in the table of contents are by no means a fully comprehensive list, but they do explore a wide range of current issues that are of concern to many people. It should be noted that many of these questions are enshrouded in controversy. This selection was deliberate. Questions with consensual answers

generate little interest, while those that stir up passionate debate will incite a learner's curiosity. The danger is that no matter how the question is answered, there will be some who will disagree with at least some of the points raised. This is a risk worth taking.

By reading the review and analysis of the history provided in each chapter of this book, the reader will be able to begin the process of relearning history. Each person will gain a greater understanding to a host of problems and issues that dominate the evening news. What happens after reading this, however, will be up to the individual learner. While this book is a start, it should be understood that the process never ends.

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